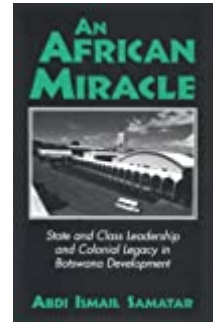


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Abdi Ismail Samatar. *An African Miracle: State and Class Leadership and Colonial Legacy in Botswana Development.* Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1999. xix + 217 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-325-00068-8.



Reviewed by Bernard K. Mbenga (Department of History, University of North-West, South Africa)

Published on H-SAfrica (March, 2001)

One of the leading (African) scholars of African political economy, Abdi Samatar sets out to show Botswana as “a socially responsible and more effective activist African state” in a generally pessimistic continent (p.2). Samatar contrasts the comparatively “awesome economic and social performance” of Botswana with that of many other African and Asian countries (p.3), and in this he has succeeded admirably. He discusses various theories of the African state and shows their inadequacies in explaining the role of the state in Africa when these theories are applied to Botswana. One theory, for example, as Samatar explains, asserts that “a strong civil society undermines the state’s capacity and, consequently, hampers capitalist development” (p.22). He argues that Botswana has had a tradition of strong traditional leaders and yet, despite this, chiefs have not hindered Botswana’s development.

Samatar discusses how diamond resources have given the state the clout in dealing with De Beers, and yet both realized their mutual interest and made compromises for their mutual benefit. More importantly, he shows how Botswana has used its huge resources of diamonds far more differently than most other states with similar fortunes. Indeed, throughout the book, Samatar regularly contrasts the many comparatively impressive successes of Botswana with the economic failures of most other African countries. He also stresses the small size, domi-

nance and legitimacy of Botswana’s post-colonial leadership and makes appropriate contrasts with the East Asian states (except Japan) to explain Botswana’s success. He gives detailed analyses of how state institutions, such as the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, the Botswana Meat Commission, etc., have been used effectively to stir Botswana to economic achievements. Samatar contrasts very well Botswana’s current ‘miracle’ with the desperate situation in which it was at independence in 1966 when it had a severe lack of its own skilled manpower and immediately exploitable economic resources. Its per capita income at the time, for example, was estimated at between R45 and R60. Consequently, the Botswana government had to depend on its former colonial power, Britain, to balance its annual budget.

Another factor that has contributed to the Botswana ‘miracle,’ Samatar argues, is the issue of localization (or Africanization) which, unlike in many other African countries, was deliberately slow in order to ensure the continuity of high standards and efficiency in Botswana’s public institutions. The dominant ruling class were assisted by expatriate technocrats who were slowly being understudied by the locals.

However, while *An African Miracle* is a highly scholarly, informative and analytical book, it has a number of flaws. Samatar refers to pre-colonial Botswana as

though it was one homogenous society: "This was a highly organized and centralized society." (p.40) There was not one but many pre-colonial Batswana societies which were, in fact, highly decentralized. Samatar also refers to what he terms "Botswana (sic) nations" in pre-colonial times, as if all of pre-colonial 'Botswana' consisted of only Batswana societies each of which was called morafe and under a kgosi. There were/are many other non-Batswana societies in Botswana, such as the Kalanga or the Bayeyi, for example, whose linguistic and cultural attributes were quite different from those of the Batswana-speaking communities.

Even more importantly, Samatar is almost totally uncritical of the glaring negative features of Botswana's economic development which, surprisingly, he merely mentions or alludes to. He, for example, mentions the "cattle-owning class" who "disproportionately benefited from commercializing the economy..." (p.68), without going into any detail at all. He also cites Botswana's "contradictory aims of economic injustice (accumulation by the dominant class) and liberal democratic policy (state's legitimacy with the poor majority)" (p.73), without discussing what the "injustice" is.

By the early 1990s, Botswana was beset with a number of serious economic scandals by high-ranking politicians and government officials, which Samatar should have documented to give a balance to his book, which is otherwise quite skewed. It would be very surprising indeed if Samatar was not aware of the many incidences of corruption and embezzlement of huge sums of money in the top echelons of the Botswana government by the early 1990s. In 1990, for example, a government contract for the supply of teaching materials to primary schools in the country was awarded to a company without examining its employees or their qualifications. There was no tender competition and the contract was not approved by the Central Tender Board. Consequently, the government lost very many millions of Pula because of such irregularities. In 1991, the Presidential Commission of Enquiry into illegal land transactions in peri-urban land transactions close to Gaborone found evidence of the use of high office for personal gain in these illegal activities and implicated the then Vice-President and Minister for Local Government, P.S. Musi, and the Minister of Agriculture, D.K. Kwelagobe. Consequently, both resigned from the government in March 1992.

By the late 1980s, the Botswana Housing Corporation (BMC) had become riddled with "inefficiencies and wrong-doing" which also "existed within the supervis-

ing Ministry," of Local Government. Both Ministers and civil servants had used the Corporation "for personal advantage," while "irresponsible, wrong decisions had been taken." The BMC, for example, (mis)spent "P53 million on a redundant office-building" for itself unjustifiably. The massive financial expenditure on the military base at Molepolole, completed in 1995, which amounted to some US\$600 million, in a country with acute rural poverty and a huge gulf between the rich and poor, quite clearly, mars Botswana's reputation of pragmatic, efficient and prudent financial management. The dealings with, and attitudes to, the National Development Bank (NDB) by government ministers had driven it to near bankruptcy by late 1993. By the early 1990s, these officials had accumulated huge loans from the bank, for which some of them were not eligible to get, and were unwilling to pay back, with "some in default for over six months." Among the top government leadership, there was, as Good quite aptly puts it, "greed and negligence" (Kenneth Good, 1994, pp. 500-512). (1)

I am astounded that in a book published in 1999, Samatar leaves out completely the issue of the devastating pandemic of AIDS in Botswana and its impact on and implications for that country's economy. It is common knowledge that Botswana is one of the worst-affected countries in sub-Saharan Africa, now with one in every three adults either HIV-positive or already sick with the disease, and most of the victims are the young who are expected to continue their country's "African Miracle." The increasingly prevalent and costly problem of many young Batswana sent on Botswana government scholarships abroad but who have to be returned home without completing their studies because they are either dead or sick with Aids, has recently prompted the government to test all applicants for HIV first, before they are awarded the scholarship. This is just an indication of the seriousness of the problem. The President of Botswana, Festus Mogae, and other government leaders have frequently admitted in public the gravity and magnitude of this fast-growing problem, which is threatening to turn the "African Miracle" into an "African Catastrophe."

Finally, Samatar should have paid attention to the simple issue of the singular and plural issue of the terms Botswana/Batswana to avoid grammatical errors. It is not, for example, "Botswana nations" (p.40), but Batswana nations; not "Botswana territories" (p.44), but Batswana territories; Batswana merafe, not "Botswana morafes" (p.46); another naturalized Motswana, and not "another naturalized Batswana." (p.80)

Perhaps these problems could be rectified in the next edition? All the above criticisms notwithstanding, however, *An African Miracle* is a highly analytical, skillfully written and informative book.

Notes:

[1]. Kenneth Good, "Corruption and Mismanage-

ment in Botswana: a Best-Case Example?", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 32, 3 (1994), pp.499-521.

Copyright (c) 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Bernard K. Mbenga. Review of Samatar, Abdi Ismail, *An African Miracle: State and Class Leadership and Colonial Legacy in Botswana Development*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. March, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5032>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.